



NEWSLETTER

News and updates about sage-grouse conservation in Idaho

WEST CENTRAL SAGE-GROUSE CANDIDATE CONSERVATION AGREEMENT WITH ASSURANCES

Officials with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service on Friday, February 12, signed a landmark conservation agreement to protect sage-grouse in west-central Idaho.

The Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances will be the first such agreement for greater sage-grouse anywhere in the bird's range. Under this agreement, private property owners in the area covered by the agreement who adopt voluntary conservation measures would receive assurances that they would not be subject to increased regulations should sage-grouse be listed under the Endangered Species Act.

"We hope agreements like this could be a model for future sage-grouse conservation efforts in Idaho and throughout the West," Idaho Fish and Game Director Cal Groen said. "We're proud to be part of this pioneering effort to work with private land owners to protect sage-grouse."

Sage-grouse have become a symbol of healthy sagebrush ecosystems across the West. Once plentiful, their numbers have declined for a variety of reasons. Invasions

of exotic annual grasses have modified fire regimes, conversion of sagebrush stands to agricultural use, energy development, subdivision of rural lands and other human developments have fragmented and reduced the large, secure expanses of habitat necessary to sustain sage-grouse.

The well-documented declines in the number of sage-grouse and the reasons for those declines have led to the Fish and Wildlife Service's determination that sage-grouse listing under the Federal Endangered Species Act is "warranted but precluded."

In response to a potential listing and the associated potential effect to property owners, Idaho, in coordination with the West Central Sage-grouse Local Working Group, has developed this programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances. The local working group consists of local private landowners, agencies and other parties interested in sage-grouse. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Natural Resources Conservation Service are helping with funding and implementation on private lands.

"This is species conservation at its best,

and the efforts will help conserve greater sage-grouse and their habitat, while ensuring landowners have the flexibility to maintain operation on their lands," said Jeff Foss, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Idaho state supervisor.

This 30-year agreement would facilitate conservation of sage-grouse and their habitat in portions of Adams, Gem, Payette and Washington counties. More than 644,000 acres could be considered for enrollment in the agreement. Landowners who sign up, would not be burdened with additional regulations as long as they meet the terms of the agreement, should sage-grouse be listed.

Landowners may be eligible for federal Farm Bill programs administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service to help offset costs of conservation work.

"We are excited about the opportunity to offer our various Farm Bill programs to enrolled landowners within the West Central area to help restore and enhance sage-grouse habitat on their working farms and ranches," said Jeff Burwell, NRCS state conservationist.

Idaho Fish and Game will have the primary responsibility to work with private landowners who sign up under the agreement to develop individual plans for sage-grouse conservation on their lands.

"This agreement again demonstrates the state of Idaho's commitment to collaborative conservation," said Tom C. Perry, acting administrator of the Governor's Office of Species Conservation. "Only through collective and collaborative efforts, such as the Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances, can the state and its partners conserve this important species and its habitat while providing a measure of certainty and predictability for landowners."



Left to right: Mark Weatherstone (NRCS), Cal Groen (IDFG), Jeff Foss (USFWS). **Back row:** Tom Hemker (IDFG), Wendy Green (West-Central Local Working Group facilitator), Gene Gray (West-Central Local Working Group), Joe Hinson (Northwest Natural Resource Group LLC), Margaret Soulen Hinson (rancher and West-Central Local Working Group), Tom Perry (Governor's Office of Species Conservation), Don Kemner (IDFG), Kendra Womack (USFWS).

LOCAL WORKING GROUP UPDATES

Application packets are now available for the 2010 funding round for Cooperative Sage-grouse Projects. Packets can be downloaded from the website:

http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/wildlife/plans/sage_grouse/10proposal.cfm

BIG DESERT

The Big Desert LWG Sage-grouse Conservation Plan is final! Congratulations to the group and their facilitator, Wendy Green Lowe! The plan

is available to download from the IDFG sage-grouse web page. At their last meeting, the group agreed to an approximate schedule for future

meetings, including periodic meetings to monitor implementation of their plan.

CHALLIS

At their December meeting the group discussed amendments to their plan and up-

dates to habitat mapping. Vince Guyer provided an update on the status of 3 OSC-

funded projects. They also discussed future project ideas.

EAST IDAHO UPLANDS

The group's radio-telemetry project in the Bear Lake Plateau is set to start this spring! Idaho Fish and Game biologists will start trapping and radio-collaring birds near leks

in the spring. A graduate student from Utah State University will take over the project in the summer. The student will follow the radio-collared birds and start to

answer important questions about sage-grouse ecology and movements in this unique area. The LWG also reports that their plan is almost done.

GREATER CURLEW VALLEY

The Curlew LWG members continue to be concerned about how rapidly CRP is being lost in their area. The poten-

tial for the Gateway West transmission project coming through their area is also a concern.

JARBIDGE

The Jarbidge LWG has started updating their plan based on habitat changes in their planning area due to the 2007

Murphy Complex Fire. They also looked at future potential projects and funding opportunities.

NORTH MAGIC VALLEY

The North Magic Valley LWG is about halfway done with their plan. They have about 12-15 members that meet once per month. They are currently working through the

threats in their planning area. The group has a project with BLM where they are taking the standards and guides from BLM, including sage-grouse habitat assessments,

and putting them into a database where they can use them as they write and implement their plan.

OWYHEE

The Owyhee LWG completed 2 juniper mastication projects this past fall. They will evaluate the soils and the grass/forb response to the treat-

ment next summer. They will be evaluating additional private lands for juniper removal for fall 2010. In addition, the group's sage-grouse radio-

telemetry project to monitor for a potential West Nile virus outbreak will begin this summer.



LOCAL WORKING GROUP UPDATES, CONTINUED.

SHOSHONE BASIN

The group met in January. They reviewed the draft BLM permits of permittees that they have been working with for the past 10 years. They

also prioritized projects for this year. The LWG had a public meeting in March to invite new participation, especially from permittees in the

western portion of the planning area. The meeting was well-attended.

The Idaho Sage-grouse Local Working Groups State-wide Annual Report 2009 is available to download at:
http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/wildlife/plans/sage_grouse/

SOUTH MAGIC VALLEY

The group is struggling to keep participation from private citizens and landowners, so they plan to have another

public meeting this spring. In the meantime, they are moving ahead with their local plan. They have divided their

planning area into sub-planning units and are working on identifying the threats in each unit.

UPPER SNAKE

At their February meeting, the group had a presentation from Jeff Perry from the Department of Energy about road upgrade alternatives that could affect sage-grouse at the Idaho National Lab. They also had a presentation

from Joe Hinson about preliminary plans to prepare a CCAA for the Sand Creek Desert. Joe invited people to participate in a committee to develop the draft CCAA. At Dubois Grouse Days this year, April 17-18, there will be a

formal dedication of the Kent Christopher memorial at the Camas National Wildlife Refuge.

Dubois Grouse Days is April 17-18!

WEST CENTRAL

The West Central programmatic CCAA has been signed (see front page) The first site-specific plan is also underway. The LWG has chosen the CCAA to be their local plan. Biologist Gene Gray continues to radio-track sage-grouse and work on annual reports. He is also starting to

reach out to landowners on the western side of the study area. This is significant since Gene has found several wintering birds on the breaks of the Snake River, including 2 radio-collared birds that have flown across the river to Oregon. Although the west central population has long been

considered isolated, this new information suggests that there may be an interchange with Oregon birds during the winter. The group hosted the March SAC meeting in Midvale. Everyone appreciated the LWG's hospitality and the great meals provided by the Midvale Lions Club.



SHOSHONE-PAIUTE TRIBES

Tribal biologists will continue to survey sage-grouse leks

this spring and follow radio-collared birds

GROUSE WORKSHOP IN TWIN FALLS

The 27th Western Agencies Sage and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Workshop will be held June 8-10, 2010, in Twin Falls, Idaho. This workshop is hosted by the Idaho Department of Fish & Game and the Western Agencies Sage and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Technical Com-

mittee. The workshop will provide a forum for researchers, managers, academicians, and other enthusiasts from across western North America to exchange recent advances in research, management, and conservation efforts. This workshop will also promote communication and coopera-

tion between and among agencies, organizations, and individuals.

For more information visit the website:

<http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/apps/grouse/>

Ecology and Conservation of Greater Sage-Grouse: A Landscape Species and its Habitats is a special publication of the Studies in Avian Biology. Individual peer-reviewed chapters are available for download at:
<http://sagemap.wr.usgs.gov/monograph.aspx>

IDAHO SAGE-GROUSE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

600 S. Walnut St.
P.O. Box 25
Boise, ID 83707

Visit our website!

http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/cms/wildlife/plans/sage_grouse/

WHAT'S NEXT FOR SAGE-GROUSE CONSERVATION? BY DON KEMNER, SAGE-GROUSE PROGRAM COORDINATOR

On March 5th the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) announced that greater sage-grouse are warranted for listing under the Endangered Species Act but that listing was precluded due to higher priorities. Thus, greater sage-grouse are listed as a **Candidate** species. Habitat loss and fragmentation are the primary concerns in our part of sage-grouse range. Invasive species, wildfire, infrastructure, and inappropriate grazing management appear to be the priority threats. Annually, the FWS will review

their decision and determine if the status of greater sage-grouse should be changed. The good news is sage-grouse management remains with the states. The challenge in front of everyone involved in sage-grouse management will be showing progress benefiting sage-grouse. How? It is a tall order requiring everyone's collaboration. Our primary focus should address the priority threats identified by FWS. To that end, NRCS recently announced their sage-grouse initiative providing \$16 million dollars in the Environmental

Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) for sage-grouse management rangewide. These funds can be used on private, tribal, state, and federal lands. The deadline to sign up is April 23. Contact your county NRCS office for details. The Request for Proposals (see insert on page 2) for cooperative sage-grouse funds has been announced. Consider the threats when developing these project proposals. I'll talk more about conservation efforts in the next newsletter.

SUMMARY OF RECENT HABITAT PROJECTS FUNDED WITH COOPERATIVE SAGE-GROUSE FUNDS

Every winter Idaho Fish and Game requests information for the *Idaho Sage-grouse Local Working Groups Statewide Annual Report*. The Annual Report provides updates and information on Local Working Group activities and projects, and sage-grouse populations, habitats and threats. We also ask for more specific information on those sage-grouse habitat projects funded through the Governor's Office of Species Conservation. This information is critical for many reasons including that it:

- Allows IDFG and OSC to track project expenditures and status
- Relays accountability to our funding sources, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Tracks conservation efforts statewide
- Provides information on successes and failures, which adds to our database of techniques for successful sage-grouse habitat restoration
- Results in information Local Working Groups and others can use to plan future projects.

This year we received information on 10 habitat projects that were completed or ongoing in 2009. Some project proponents did not provide the detail we asked for—lack of information hinders our ability to share results and highlight the positive work we are all doing for sage-grouse in Idaho. Below are brief summaries from a few projects.

Curlew Experimental Plantings

The U.S. Forest Service tested 5 different habitat restoration techniques on 5-acre study plots on the Curlew National Grassland. For a portion of this study, locally adapted "Bonneville" big sagebrush was collected, grown at the Shoshone-Bannock nursery, and seedlings were planted in November 2008. Results are currently being analyzed.



"Bonneville" big sagebrush seedling in August 2009 after planting in November 2008.

Curlew Green Strips

The U.S. Forest Service planted forage kochia on 22 acres as green strips/fire breaks to prevent or contain future wildfires and protect existing stands of sagebrush on the Curlew National Grassland. In summer 2008 the site was prepared by mowing with a masticator/chipper to reduce fuel and competition for the kochia seed. Kochia was broadcast seeded on approximately 6 inches of snow in Decem-

ber 2008. Unfortunately, site visits in 2009 revealed very low germination rates for the kochia seed. Some seed is likely still viable, so site visits in 2010 will be important to fully evaluate the success of the seeding.

Brush Management Project in the West Central Planning Area

The landowner used a Lawson aerator to reduce the canopy cover of dense sagebrush and bitterbrush stands on 96.5 acres; native grasses and forbs were re-seeded behind the aerator. Prior to treatment, 2 shrub stands measured 36% and 48% shrub cover. The goal of the aerator was to reduce the shrub cover to 15-20%. Project monitoring will continue in 2010.

Big Desert Sagebrush Seedlings

30,000 sagebrush seedlings were planted in an area on the Big Desert that burned in the Round Butte Fire in 2005.



Broadcast seeding of forage kochia on the Curlew National Grassland, December 2008.